

Up Front

Social Media & the Truncated News Pyramid

A major concern of PR professionals is the "rapid" decline in traditional media and the evolution of new media. That's my main take-away from ExL Pharma's 5th Annual Public Relations & Communications Summit, which was held at Pfizer headquarters in New York City in July, 2009.

More than the economy, the rise of new media was considered the #1 global issue facing pharma PR, according to a poll of the audience, which included many of the best and brightest people in pharma corporate communications, including at least a dozen people from Pfizer. This was also something Ray Kerins, Pfizer's Head of Global Media Relations referred to at a previous conference (see "Pfizer's Social Media Strategy: Piss Off John Mack, Get Hundreds of New Followers!"; <http://bit.ly/Hn0HM>).

"We're not dead yet," said a newspaper guy in the audience at Pfizer. He pointed out that only 100 out of 7,000 newspapers nationwide went out of business last year. Sally Susman, Senior Vice President & Chief Communications Officer at Pfizer, and others noted, however, that cutbacks across the board at newspapers left fewer beat reporters to cover the pharmaceutical industry. As Susman described it "there are fewer outlets for promotion."

Of course, there are many, many MORE outlets available to pharma PR people for promotion, most notably blogs.

Blogs are a real problem for PR professionals who are not sure how to leverage bloggers like they have learned to leverage pharma beat reporters. They worry that bloggers are not professional journalists and have no uniform code of conduct (see, for example, "Novo to Social Media: Report the Facts"; <http://bit.ly/VBC4z>). And there are many, many bloggers out there to contend with.



Soon, only us bloggers will be left as the news pyramid continues to be truncated.

PR people are used to issuing press releases to a few journalists at the top of the traditional news pyramid. When the top was blown off by the social media revolution, these professionals had no proven mechanism by which to reach the many thousands of bloggers at the BOTTOM of the pyramid—until now.

That mechanism is Twitter, which is being adopted rapidly by most pharma PR people.

"Twitter works," said Karen Carolonza, principal at Green Room Public Relations. "Whoever thought I would mention Twitter and pharma in the same sentence!"

PR people refer to rise of social media as an "evolution, not revolution." They are wrong. Let me explain why.

We all are uncomfortable with revolution, which means we have to completely and radically change the way we do business. We much prefer "evolution," which implies we just have to make a few adjustments and adapt gradually to change.

That's why many pharma PR people are beginning to schmooze bloggers just like they do reporters—by having them over to dinner (see "Thank You Johnson & Johnson for Dinner"; <http://bit.ly/9zxET>) and inviting them to "roundtables" (see "Chantix 'Roundtable' Apparently Not Round and Not a Table"; <http://bit.ly/iXoOF>). [Also see "A New Era of Pharma Marketing: Direct to Journalist (DTJ)" for other tactics employed. <http://bit.ly/w7xEm>]

Personally, I do not mind being invited "inside the tent." Ray Kerins was kind enough to go out of his way to make sure I was able to attend the PR conference at Pfizer. But I am not going to act like a journalist on my blog. However, I try to be more journalistic here in *Pharma Marketing News*.

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I think most people write blogs in order to put their personal spin on issues of importance to them. I'm interested in checking the facts, but I am not going to call the PR department every time I post something to Pharma Marketing Blog. If you have been reading that blog for some time, you know about the many instances when I have called or emailed the corporate communications people at pharmaceutical companies and never heard back from them. This problem was pointed out by several speakers at the PR summit.

It's been a lazy, slow-moving world for PR people up until now. Beat reporters used to work months on a story and had well-defined deadlines. PR people always began a conversation with reporters with "What's your deadline?"—a question that has lost its significance in a world where the deadline for every story is NOW!

But reaching out to bloggers like me is not part of the revolution. It's part of the evolution that pharma PR people are trying to create. No matter how much they reach out, they will not be able to control the news, which is what they want to do.

The real revolution is people telling their own stories, creating the news that other people want to read. Pharma PR people understand this and they will co-opt the revolution, not just adapt to the

evolution of media. They want, for example, to "change the debate" about drug pricing and one of the chief tactics they use is to get patients to tell their stories.

This is how social media is currently being employed by pharmaceutical companies. It's not about the brand, it's about survival of the pharmaceutical industry.



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